

## Thorndon Birdlife, May 2013

After the coldest March since 1962, spring finally seems to have sprung and today, 23rd April, is very pleasantly warm and sunny, even if the trees around the village do look about a month behind.

In many ways April provided the typical mix of late winter and early spring birds, but also produced some real surprises.

In the second week of April there was at least one brambling in a garden along the High Street. These handsome finches breed in Scandinavia and are winter visitors to our shores and when the last ones pass through on their way back north in the second half of April the males are often a striking vision of black and orange. Bramblings are very fond of beech mast but this has been in relatively short supply this winter because of last summer's very wet conditions. Deprived of this, bramblings and coal tits have been coming into gardens a lot more as they take advantage of the seeds that we put out in our feeders. In the same week I finally heard and saw my first chiffchaff of the spring in the Fen, which is always a good sign that spring is on its way.



Brambling



Siskin

Other birds that spend the winter with us and then pass through on their spring migration include redpolls and siskins and both these species have been seen at Braiseworth. Like other finches, they will happily come to garden feeding stations but because of their smaller bills they are well equipped to take nyger seed from the feeders with the very small holes in.

I was delighted to see a treecreeper in my garden as it is only the second time I've seen one here, although they are much more frequent in the parts of the village with more

in the way of mature trees. The one I saw flew in to the bottom of an elder bush and made its way up the trunk and then, once it got to the top, it flew off to start the process all over again on another tree. This is because although they are well adapted to climbing trees, using their stiff tails as a prop (like a woodpecker), finding insects in the cracks and crevices in the bark with their long, slender, downcurved bills, they can't climb back down and so have to fly to the bottom of another tree or bush and start climbing all over again.



Treecreeper

I've seen a barn owl twice during the day recently at Thorndon Hill and Rishangles and I really hope they survive and nest successfully this year as across the County they have been struggling to find food in the prolonged cold and snowy conditions.

On 14th April I saw my first swallow of the year at Mendlesham and the same day one was seen at Rishangles (I saw three there today), along with two house martins, and the

following day the swallows were back at the barn in the village where last year they laid no fewer than four clutches.



Red kite

Now, I wish I'd been present along the High Street on 17th April when there were two very notable sightings. The first concerned a red kite that was seen being mobbed by jackdaws. Although red kites are much more common in Britain now than they were thirty years ago, they are always a delight and thrill to see: one of our most spectacular birds of prey, with their pale heads, long, pale, forked tails, rich, foxy red bodies and pale wing

patches they are a striking sight. I've only seen two previously in our part of Suffolk

myself but I have received two other reports in the last couple of years. Spring time is when most red kites occur in Suffolk but as yet they have not established themselves as a breeding bird in the County.

The same day a truly extraordinary record was of a white-tailed eagle, also seen over the High Street. There has been one of these magnificent raptors in Norfolk and Suffolk over the last month or so but they are a rare sight. The bird that has been seen recently is a juvenile, so it doesn't have the adult's white tail, from which the species gets its name, but they are very distinctive. Although essentially dark brown, it is their sheer size that is most remarkable. They have very long (up to 240cm (8 feet!)) wings, which are also very broad - the proverbial flying barn door - quite a prominent head and a rather disproportionately short tail. I've seen four in Suffolk in the last thirty years but I'd love to see one in Thorndon, so I'm rather envious of the lucky couple of people who saw this one.



White tailed eagle



Before the cold weather broke I watched a brown hare in a field where I've seen them in the past but not for some time. This one was keeping very low, facing into a bitterly cold north-westerly wind. A few days later, when the weather had warmed up considerably, I watched what may have been the same one sprawled out, basking in the sun. That's spring for you. Today I saw two together and they were keeping close

together and so may be a pair; but not just yet as the female did give the male a quick swipe with her front paws when he got a little too amorous.

Other signs of spring on the lovely warm, sunny 21st April were a buff-tailed bumblebee (one of the first bumblebees to emerge after its winter hibernation) and one of my favourite early spring insects, a dark-edged bee-fly. These harmless insects look like a small bee



because they have very hairy, rounded bodies, but they are distinctive because of their long proboscis and translucent wings with a dark bar, which is quite obvious when they settle on flowers.

May is the month in the birding calendar when literally anything can turn up but what we should notice is the birdsong reaching its peak, the return of our swifts from their African wintering grounds in the first few days of the month and, I hope, spotted flycatchers.

Thank you to everyone who has contacted me with details of their sightings over the last month. Please keep them coming in. I shall be especially interested to hear about any turtle doves and spotted flycatchers but I always welcome all reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Braiseworth and Hestley Green.

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